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# Setting the “Stage” for Success: A creative venture for youth experiencing housing insecurity

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# Setting the “Stage” for Success: A creative venture for youth experiencing housing insecurity

**Abstract**

The United States Department of Justice estimates that 1.7 million teenagers experience homelessness every year. Youth experiencing homelessness often rely on maladaptive coping behaviors such as self-harm and alcohol and drug abuse, are at higher risk of suicide and being victims of physical and sexual violence than their non-homeless peers. Creating safe spaces and effective interventions with this population can be challenging, thus organizations must be adaptive and resourceful with their approaches to intervention. Studies indicate that creativity can strengthen resiliency in this population by boosting self-esteem and encouraging positive coping skills. This innovative Senior Capstone project will propose a three-pronged intervention for youth struggling with housing instability and homelessness that will increase job readiness skills, resilience, and emotional well-being through theatrical job training and performances, mental health care, and mentoring.

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Setting the “Stage” for Success:

A creative venture for youth experiencing housing insecurity

McKenzie M. Brock

Social Work Senior Capstone- Pacific University 2016

**Setting the “Stage” for Success:  
A Creative Venture for Youth Experiencing Housing Insecurity**

The United States Department of Justice estimates that 1.7 million teenagers experience homelessness every year. Youth experiencing homelessness often rely on maladaptive coping behaviors such as self-harm and alcohol and drug abuse, are at higher risk of suicide and being victims of physical and sexual violence than their non-homeless peers. Creating safe spaces and effective interventions with this population can be challenging, thus organizations must be adaptive and resourceful with their approaches to intervention. Studies indicate that creativity can strengthen resiliency in this population by boosting self-esteem and encouraging positive coping skills. This innovative Senior Capstone project will propose a three-pronged intervention for youth struggling with housing instability and homelessness that will increase job readiness skills, resilience, and emotional well-being through theatrical job training and performances, mental health care, and mentoring.

## **Background**

According to the 2014 Annual Homeless Assessment Report, “194,302 youth and children were homeless on a single night in 2014” (Youth, n.d.) while the National Alliance to End Homelessness estimates, “550,00 unaccompanied youth and young adults up to age 24 experience a homelessness episode of longer than one week” (Youth, n.d.). Other sources estimate the number could be closer to 3 million (Whitbeck, 2009, cited in Ferguson, 2012). It is a challenge to obtain an exact estimate on the size of this population because of their inherent transitory nature. It is probable that the numbers are much higher than the official count. Unquestionably, the scope of the problem is substantial. Every night across the United States young people are sleeping on the streets, in shelters, and anywhere else they can find a bit of comfort and warmth.

Research indicates that some youth leave home because they are no longer safe and need to escape abusive situations (Prescott, Sekendur, Bailey, Hoshino, 2008). There are numerous reasons why a young person might leave home including but not limited to abuse, economic hardship, oppression, and a family crisis (Seattle/King County Coalition for the Homeless, 2002, cited in Prescott et al., 2008). Additionally, the number of LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness is alarming. Twenty percent of homeless youth identify as LGBTQ in contrast to only ten percent of the general youth population (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009). These youth encounter countless stressors. In 2008, the National Coalition for the Homeless found that, “Homeless youth often experience severe anxiety and depression, poor health, low self-esteem, problems stemming from conduct disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder” (Prescott et. al., 2008, p.157). It is common for youth to utilize maladaptive coping behaviors such as self-harm, alcohol and drug abuse, sexually risky behaviors, and suicide to combat the

stressors they endure (Dang, Conger, Breslau&Miller, 2014). LGBTQA youth experiencing homelessness are at higher risk for sexual assault and suicide (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009). Creating safe spaces and effective interventions with traumatized youth is a challenge. Organizations must be adaptive and resourceful with their approaches to intervention with this population.

Effective interventions with youth experiencing homelessness can increase job readiness, leadership, and community connectedness. Prescott et. al. found that “most research in this area approaches the problem using a damage model that focuses on pathology and attempts to rescue the youth from their plight rather than exploring ways to strengthen and encourage them” (2008, p. 156). However, this population can benefit enormously from creative interventions utilizing a strength-based perspective. Not only do the youth themselves benefit from creative interventions, but the surrounding community will benefit from empowering the youth to be generous community members who can contribute to the economy and social capital. According to studies by Baron & Hartnagel, (1997) and Gaetz & O’Grady (2002), “Employment is particularly important to homeless young adults as it contributes to their identity formation, links them to conventional institutions and social norms, and provides income that facilitates economic self-sufficiency and independent living” (cited in Ferguson, Bender, Thompson, Maccio, and Pollio, 2012). Research indicates the effectiveness of interventions that incorporate creativity, resilience building activities, and mentoring. This Senior Capstone project proposes an intervention that aims to combine employment preparation with the effective interventions previously mentioned.

### **Literature Review:**

*Interventions with youth experiencing homelessness: building resilience through relationship, leadership and creativity*

### **Introduction**

According to the 2014 Annual Homeless Assessment Report, “194,302 youth and children were homeless on a single night in 2014” (“Youth”) while the National Alliance to End Homelessness estimates, “550,00 unaccompanied youth and young adults up to age 24 experience a homelessness episode of longer than one week (“Youth”). Other sources estimate the number could be closer to 3 million (Whitbeck, 2009, cited in Ferguson, 2012). It is a challenge to obtain an exact estimate on the size of this population because of their inherent transitory nature. It is probable that the numbers are much higher than the official count. Unquestionably, the scope of the problem is substantial. Every night across the United States young people are sleeping on the streets, in shelters, and anywhere else they can find a bit of comfort and warmth.

Research indicates that some youth leave home because they are no longer safe and need to escape abusive situations (Prescott, Sekendur, Bailey, Hoshino, 2008). There are many reasons why a young person might leave home including but not limited to abuse, economic hardship, oppression, and a family crisis (Seattle/King County Coalition for the Homeless, 2002, cited in Prescott et al., 2008). Additionally, the number of LGBTQA youth experiencing homelessness is alarming. Twenty percent of homeless youth identify as LGBTQA in contrast to only ten percent of the general youth population (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009).

These youth encounter many stressors. In 2008, the National Coalition for the Homeless found that, “Homeless youth often experience severe anxiety and depression, poor health, low self-esteem, problems stemming from conduct disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder” (Prescott et. al., 2008, p.157). It is common for youth to utilize maladaptive coping behaviors such as self-harm, alcohol and drug abuse, sexually risky behaviors, and suicide to combat the stressors they endure (Dang, Conger, Breslau&Miller, 2014). LGBTQA youth experiencing homelessness are at higher risk for sexual assault and suicide (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009).

Creating safe spaces and effective interventions with traumatized youth is a challenge.

Organizations must be adaptive and resourceful with their approaches to intervention with this population.

Interventions that highlight resilience in youth experiencing homelessness have gained the attention of researchers. Resilience can be defined as, “the ability to overcome adversity or rebound when faced with stressors” (Grabbe, Nguy, Higgins, 2011, p. 926). The study by Prescott et. al. states, “Resilience is a particular necessity in the survival of homeless adolescents” (2008, p.157). Wolin and Wolin describe resilience as “the capacity to channel your inner pain rather than exploding” (Prescott et. al, 2008, p.157). From a Social Work perspective, resilience can be linked to “strengths-based perspectives,” or the belief that a person’s protective factors can be more of a determinant than their risk factors.

Current interventions primarily focus on reducing sexual-risk behaviors and increasing housing for youth experiencing homelessness. There are fewer interventions addressing how to build resilience in this population. Prescott et. al. found that, “most research in this area approaches the problem using a damage model that focuses on pathology and attempts to rescue the youth from their plight rather than exploring ways to strengthen and encourage them” (2008,



p. 156). This population can benefit enormously from creative interventions utilizing a strength-based perspective. This review of literature includes thirteen articles that focus on reinforcing resilience through relationships, leadership, and creativity in youth experiencing homelessness. Articles that cover the following interventions are included: Art Therapy, Animal-Assisted Therapy, Community Reinforcement Approach, Drama Therapy, Empowerment and Leadership, Mindfulness Meditation, Natural Mentors, and Social Enterprise Intervention.

### **Relationships**

A study by Dang et. al. (2014) explains, “Drawing from studies on resilience, it has been postulated that protective factors such as positive social connections that foster resilience may contribute little to children who are already rich with assets, but for those with significant risks of negative outcomes, such factors can dramatically alter the course of their development” (p. 1132). Positive social connections can mean a world of difference to youth experiencing homelessness. Johnson, Whitbeck and Hoyt (2005), and Ennett, Bailey and Federman (1999) assert, “Homeless youth who identified family members as part of their social networks were less likely to engage in prostitution, use alcohol, or associate with delinquent peers (Dang et al., 2014, p. 1122). These connections can build resilience and reduce maladaptive behaviors. The following articles below highlight three possible interventions to build resilience through relationships.

Dang, Conger, Breslau, and Miller (2014) examined the extent to which the role of natural mentors acted as a protective factor for youth experiencing homelessness. Their findings indicate, “Having a natural mentor was associated with higher satisfaction with social support and fewer risky sexual behaviors” in a study including 197 homeless youth (Dang et. al., 2014, p. 1121). A natural mentor is someone who youth indicate as a non-parental adult within their

existing social network, who provides insight and some guidance for the youth. Due to the transient nature of this population, traditional mentoring programs may not have the same effectiveness with this population. This study took place in Northern California and included youth, ages 14 through 21 years, who identified as having spent more than two nights at a place that was not their home (Dang et al., 2014). The study asked, “Is there an important adult at least 25 years old other than your parent or guardian who you can go to for support and guidance or if you need to make an important decisions, or who inspires you to do your best?” (Dang et. al, 2014, p. 1125). Seventy-four percent of the youth reported having natural mentors. The findings state, “Bivariate correlations revealed that *satisfaction with social support* was positively correlated with having a natural mentor” (Dang et. al, 2014, p. 1130). This study is not without limitations. As a cross-sectional study, it is correlational in nature, so it is not possible to identify causation. While the research revealed more about the relationships of natural mentors and whether they were increasing positive factors for the youth, it was limited in the specific types of social support it was measuring. Furthermore, qualitative research would contribute more depth and understanding to this study. However, this study does conclude that natural mentor relationships can contribute to positive youth development and should be included in comprehensive approaches to intervention with this population (Dang et. al., 2014). The youth who positively identified natural mentors reported reduced risky sexual behaviors and higher sexually protective behaviors. This study also reveals that youth who have left home can still find value in relationships with family members who are not parents (Dang et al., 2014). It is important for vulnerable youth to be able to discuss topics like sexual health with someone they trust. Further research regarding natural mentors and longitudinal benefits for youth experiencing homelessness would be valuable for this area of research.

A study by Slesnick, Prestopnik, Meyers and Glassman found the Community Reinforcement Approach (CRA) to increase social stability and reduce substance abuse and depression in homeless youth. This intervention was conducted in Albuquerque with 180 youth (N=180), between the ages of 14 and 21. In the CRA Intervention, therapists partnered with the client for an average of 6.8 treatment sessions over the course of six months (Slesnick, Prestopnik, Meyers & Glassman, 2007). The article explains, “CRA uses an operant perspective that is based on the belief that environment contingencies play a powerful role in encouraging and discouraging behavior” (Slesnick et al. 2007, p. 1241). There was a control group (N=84) who were randomly assigned to participate in “Treatment as Usual,” which included the typical services they would receive from the drop-in center such as meals, showers, a place to sleep etc. The researchers found that, “an open door policy, engagement of youth slowly and without pressure through a drop-in center, and employing charismatic, informed therapists can contribute to effective engagement and maintenance of these youth in treatment” (Slesnick et al., 2007, p. 1249). More research is needed to determine long-term effectiveness, but the initial results are promising. This study is limited in that the youth in this study were only assessed post-treatment; Additionally, these youth were accessing resources from the drop-in center, therefore the findings may not be generalizable to other homeless youth, and some youth who may be at higher risk were not included which may skew the data (Slesnick et al., 2007). The therapists in this intervention had the goal to empower the youth to change their activities by changing the setting or changing their responses to outside influences. Through role-play and homework assignments, youth were able to practice new skills (Slesnick et al., 2007). The manner in which therapists partnered with the youth to establish collective goals from a strengths based perspective stands out in this study to be considered for future interventions with this population.

For many youth experiencing homelessness, loneliness is a difficult stressor. A study by Lynn Rew (2000) assessed the role of friends and pets as companions for these youth. Rew collected qualitative interviews from youth experiencing homelessness (N=32) who were age 15 to 23 years. These interviews were collected from a convenience sample in central Texas. The theme of loneliness was presented by many of the youth: “The first theme to emerge was how lonely the adolescents felt, and their responses varied from not feeling lonely at all to feeling very lonely. The second theme was the circumstances that provoked feelings of loneliness. The third theme was coping with loneliness” (Rew, 2000, p. 127). Many of the youth admitted to feelings of loneliness especially around holidays, birthdays, and nighttime. While none of the questions asked directly for coping skills, 81% of the youth identified being with friends and having a dog for a companion as their primary coping strategies (Rew, 2000). One twenty year old male stated, “Having a dog makes me feel like I gotta stay healthier so the dog’s ok. I mean, if I just sit there and kick off somewhere the dog’s going to be stuck by herself” (Rew, 2000, p. 129). In examining this research, Rew highlights the common theme of loneliness because they had no connections and were travelling alone (Rew, 2000). Further research regarding the effectiveness of animal-assisted interventions upon the experiences of youth experiencing homelessness could illuminate how organizations might better meet their needs. Rew also asks further research be conducted to help focus on why some youth so readily admit their feelings of loneliness while others deny them (Rew, 2000). While this article did not present a new intervention it did highlight the opinions of youth and the perceived value of companion animals and friends in the lives of youth experiencing homelessness.

These three articles highlighted the commonality of loneliness and the value of relationships among youth experiencing homelessness. These articles also highlight the

importance of utilizing the existing strengths that a youth brings with them into the interventions. Natural mentoring, Community Reinforcement Approach, and Animal-Assisted interventions contribute to the research of innovative interventions for this population. Further research could benefit from longitudinal studies incorporating youth who may not traditionally seek services at drop-in resource centers.

### **Leadership and Empowerment**

In a qualitative study by Ferguson, Kim and McCoy (2011), one youth stated, “You know just give the clients a voice and give clients you know ‘cause I feel like you know a lot of clients feel like they feel just like they were on the street. They feel like they have no voice and they feel like you know they don’t want to listen to authority so they’re going to rebel” (p. 8). In this study youth express their desire to have decisional power over some of the activities taking place at the shelter where they sleep. Giving these youth a chance to speak up and have some influence can be extremely empowering. Similar to most adolescent populations, youth experiencing homelessness benefit greatly from opportunities to hold leadership positions. The following articles will highlight interventions with inspirational ideas for building the resilience of youth through leadership opportunities.

In “Spirituality Development for Homeless Youths: A Mindfulness Meditation Feasibility Pilot,” researchers theorize that mindfulness meditations can help improve the lives of youth experiencing homelessness with demonstrated improvement in scores of spirituality, mental wellness, psychological symptoms and resilience (Grabbe et al., 2012). This study took place in the southeastern U.S. at a shelter that serves homeless youth aged 18-21, with over 70 participants (Grabbe et al., 2012). The study explains, “Mindfulness Meditation (MM) is a mind training practice that cultivates attention through an awareness of a neutral point of focus,

particularly on the breath, as an alternative to the normal wandering of the mind” (Grabbe et al., 2012 p.926). There were eight total sessions. The youth who were consistent participants became familiar with the content and were able to deliver some of the meditation directions and encourage newcomers to join. They were reimbursed for their time and received certificates of completion as “Co-Leaders” (Grabbe et al., 2012). These peer leaders were enthusiastic about their roles and were well respected by the other group members. The utilization of peer leaders undoubtedly contributed to the successfulness of this intervention.

The participants learned through this training they will always have their breath which can be a very useful source of self-care with some training in mindfulness meditation. Grabbe et al. further reported, “Resilience, as reported by youth in this study, was much higher both pre- and post-intervention than the scores reported in another study of resilience in homeless youth” (2012, p. 934). This study had a small sample size, lacked a control group, and would benefit from longitudinal research. Teaching tactical skills like MM increases protective factors for youth experiencing homelessness which may enhance resilience. The innovative utilization of regularly attending youth as Co-Leaders should be adapted into future research studies and analyzed for its benefits. This has the potential to increase attendance and buy-in from participating youth and build leadership skills and responsibility in the youth leaders.

Ferguson, Kim, and McCoy (2011), utilized a grounded theory approach to inform future studies concerning empowerment and leadership among youth experiencing homelessness. They conducted three focus groups, (n=20), with youth accessing resources from an urban drop-in shelter, utilizing convenience sampling for an inside look of youth’s perceptions of programming and leadership roles in the agency. These researchers found that most of the youth expressed desire to have more of a say in what happened at the agency, suggesting the creation of a Youth

Council (similar to a student council). They also noted they would like more of a say in the programming that was created for them, more interactions between themselves and higher up administrators, as well as more perceived ‘power’ in the agency (Ferguson et al., 2011). The youth also proposed the idea of a peer mentor program, which would bridge the gap between new youth and staff. They expressed a joint desire to work in a community service type program. One youth explained, “I honestly would like to go to another homeless shelter and feed some kids. I would like to go to a like you know for Christmas. I would like to go help wrap some presents as a church you know?” (Ferguson et al, 2011, p.13). While these researchers’ findings are not generalizable, they do represent the youths’ communal desires to contribute as leaders in their communities, give back to other communities, and act as peer mentors for each other (Ferguson et al, 2011). Further research could provide more insight into the benefits of these youth proposed suggestions. This article provides valuable information to future researchers interested in implementing interventions regarding youth empowerment and leadership. It highlights the importance of asking youth what they would like as far as programming and empowering them to have decisional power over small aspects of their lives as they connect to an organization.

Ferguson (2011) conducted a lengthy study reviewing the effectiveness of Social Enterprise Intervention with youth experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles. Social Enterprise Intervention (SEI) aims to, “strengthen youths’ internal assets to enhance positive outcomes and protect them against high risk behavior” (Ferguson, 2011, p. 496). This study posits that a combination of mentoring, job skills, leadership, and access to mental health care contribute very positively to the well-being of 16 youth in the SEI intervention, with 12 in the control group. The youth participated in an employment program that taught them graphic design skills through

popular software programs (Ferguson, 2011). In this model, it is crucial for the youth to have input into what the “career” intervention will be. This model is a blend of mental health and social enterprise. Ferguson utilized mixed methods analysis to assess the outcomes of the intervention. Ferguson asserts, “Qualitative findings suggest that the SEI influenced participants’ self-esteem, motivation, employability, relationships with peers and family, and pro-social behaviors” (2011, p. 498). The youth who participate enjoyed their work and reported finding fulfillment in their employment.

However, this intervention wasn’t without limitations. This study would benefit from a larger sample size, and future interventions should assess whether training in other career skills have such a positive effect on youth perceptions (Ferguson, 2011). This intervention is unique in its’ approach to blend social enterprise and mental health access. The youth responded positively to this approach with 69% of the youth remaining active for nine months (Ferguson, 2011). These numbers are impressive considering retention rates for programs with homeless youth are notoriously poor. This intervention further proves the value of incorporating leadership and embracing youth decisional power when creating an intervention.

These three articles highlight the commonality of embracing leadership roles and decisional power when creating an intervention for youth experiencing homelessness. Youth in these articles express a desire to have more power within these social service organizations (Ferguson et al., 2011). Further research can benefit from the model of the Mindfulness Meditation intervention, providing youth and youth leaders with resilience building skills they can utilize regardless of their physical location (Grabbe et al., 2011). Further research would also benefit from a study on the effectiveness of leadership on resilience in youth experiencing homelessness.



## **Creativity**

Creativity can strengthen resiliency in youth experiencing homelessness. It does so by boosting self-esteem, encouraging positive coping skills, and sometimes distracting one from painful circumstances (Prescott et al., 2008). The National Coalition of Creative Arts Therapies Associations Inc. (NCCATA), endorses Art Therapy, Dance/Movement Therapy, Drama Therapy, Music Therapy, Poetry Therapy, and Psychodrama. Practitioners report evidence of improved emotional, cognitive, and social functioning through their work (NCCATA). The following review will highlight ideas from three research articles regarding the effectiveness of Art Therapy and Drama Therapy with youth experiencing homelessness.

In their work with homeless youth, ages 13-25, (N=212), Prescott, Sekendur, Bailey and Hoshino, posited that there is a strong correlation between an individual's engagement in creative activity and their life achievements (2008). Positive life achievements included: securing housing, substance cessation, returning to school, employment, pro-social skills development, taking initiative, and arts sales. These researchers utilized a mixed methods approach to gather their data through a drop-in homeless shelter in Seattle, WA. The relationship between attendance and life achievements was measured through attendance records and progress logs using Pearson's *r* analysis, while the researchers utilized interviewing techniques while attendees drew a bridge and completed a questionnaire (Prescott et al., 2008). Through the qualitative findings in this study, they created the "Creativity at Every Turn" mandala, an adaptation of Wolin and Wolin's "Mandala of Resiliency" (Prescott et al., 2008). They also highlight quotes from Jade, one of the regular attendees. She spoke about what art meant to her: "Art is like being in your own little world... you can get everything out – happiness, sadness, anger" (Prescott et al., 2008, p. 160). This article is particularly notable because of the creation of the "Creativity at

Every Turn” mandala, the positive quantitative findings, and the qualitative contributions. The researchers conclude further research must be done on the impact of art on resilience. With more participants, the qualitative responses could have been stronger. It is also important to note that some of the positive life achievements reported may have contributed to youth no longer attending because they returned to school or found housing. This study reasons that, “art fosters and improves skills necessary for scholastic, social, and career success, particularly in populations that have experienced abuse and neglect” (Prescott et al., 2008, p. 162). The qualitative responses of the participants echo the notion and support the utilization of art with youth experiencing housing instability.

Kidd (2009) wrote a compelling qualitative article paralleling the marginalization of youth experiencing homeless and the L’Art Brut and Outsider Art movements. Through his research of the suicide narratives of over 200 homeless youth, he came across his passion for exploring art with them. When he was finished asking them questions for the suicide study, he would hand them a piece of paper and say “Write or draw anything you want people to see” (Kidd, 2009, p. 346). In these moments, after the formal research was over, he was able to build relationships with the youth through their art. According to the author, “Doing art at the end of the survey facilitates a more genuine relationship that, unexpectedly, helped me to ‘sink into’ the various youth subcultures in a more ethnographic manner” (Kidd, 2009, p. 351). Kidd completed interviews with over 100 youth on the streets in NYC and Toronto. The youth describe their art as a “transformation of painful feelings and experience from something experienced as internal and impacting the self to something aimed outwards and into/onto a medium” (Kidd, 2009, p. 356). The youth also saw their art as a way to bridge the gap between themselves and non-homeless persons (Kidd, 2009). Kidd concludes that these young people possess a vision of the

world that outsiders lack and that their voices should be heard. This study is limited in that there are not specific details about the population he interviewed, he only highlights a handful of the interviews and art pieces he experienced, and this kind of study could benefit from longitudinal research on the effectiveness of art contributing to resiliency in youth experiencing homelessness.

Wrentschur and Moser (2014) discover through their research what they call, “A Creative and dissident approach of empowering disadvantaged young people.” This study focused on 23 young adults with experiences of exclusion and poverty in Austria. Through workshops and an intense rehearsal process, they created a Forum Theatre play ‘Young. Broke. Labelled...is Searching For: The Good Life’ (Wrentschur&Moser, 2014). Forum Theatre is derived from Theatre of the Oppressed by Boal. The study explains Forum Theatre, “as an interactive form of theatrical performances in which the public is invited to take part in what happens on stage, to try out ideas for solutions or changes in a social or political conflict or a problem shown on stage” (Wrentschur&Moser, 2014, p. 401). Forum Theatre is a popular style of Applied Theatre that can be utilized with many populations. The audience becomes involved in the struggles portrayed by the actors and is encouraged to get up on stage themselves and try out new solutions. Through this medium, this intervention allowed audience members and political stakeholders in the community to better understand the issues and oppression these young people are facing (Wrentschur&Moser, 2014). The research team utilized interviews on personal development plans with the participants of the project, the audience members who attended the performances were asked to fill out questionnaires, and there were qualitative interviews with the political stakeholders who participated in the performances as well (Wrentschur&Moser, 2014). This intervention was highly successful. Participants, community stake holders, and audience

members all reported feelings of empowerment, mutual respect, and new understanding for this population. The participants became resources for each other as well. This model was attempted in Croatia, Hungary and Serbia as well with great reported success. This kind of study would benefit from longitudinal research regarding political change, educational changes, and the emotional states of the participants.

These three articles support the hypothesis that youth experiencing homeless and issues of poverty greatly benefit from creative interventions. The youth in these studies reported utilizing their art to communicate effectively with non-homeless populations. In the Wrentschur and Moser study, the youth were able to demonstrate political influence because of the creative inclusion of political stakeholders and community members. The researchers reported being able to connect with the youth on a different level through these artistic explorations. Further research would be beneficial regarding longitudinal outcomes in regards to art creation influencing emotional resilience in this population.

## **Conclusion**

Masten (2001) states, “Resilience is not an absolute or global trait but rather a process or mechanism underlying positive adaptation” (Dang, 2014, p. 213). Youth experiencing homelessness have a variety of needs including those related to mental wellness, housing, food insecurity, sexual health, and more. This literature review highlights articles regarding interventions to build resilience in youth experiencing homelessness. Resilience can be fostered in these youth through relationships, leadership, and creativity. The study by Grabbe et. al. posits, “Because a longer period of homelessness is associated with a breakdown of resilience, it makes sense that resilience promotion interventions should target youth at the earliest possible

stage of homelessness” (2011, p. 934). There is no time like the present to begin to build creative interventions to help these youth address their needs.

This literature review highlights the importance of the power of relationships with animals and other people in relation to combatting loneliness and building social connections, the importance of youth having decisional power and leadership roles in the organizations they utilize, and the impact of creativity on emotional well-being and potential political change efforts. Future research would benefit from longitudinal studies utilizing these three protective factors and exploring the ways they might intersect. Kidd’s article highlights the importance of looking outside of traditional research methods such as interviewing, by simply giving the youth a piece of paper and drawing utensils and asking them to write or draw anything they saw (Kidd, 2009). If possible, more research should be conducted with youth who do not utilize traditional drop-in services. Finally, interventions that seek to explore the intersections of relationships, leadership, and creativity would be well-advised to keep in mind that resilience should not be the sole focus of an intervention but part of a balanced approach to help youth experiencing homelessness as they try to obtain mental and physical wellness, housing, safety, and stability.

## **Proposed Intervention**

### **Introduction**

This creative intervention is a three-pronged approach to connect youth experiencing housing insecurity with their community through theatre. It aims to increase job readiness skills, resilience, and emotional well-being while being complimented by mental health care and mentoring. This intervention takes shape as a theatre company within an existing organization that houses youth experiencing homelessness and provides access to mental health care. Organizations that might be compatible for this kind of program would be similar to Outside In in Portland, Oregon or Urban Peak in Denver, Colorado. These are multi-faceted organizations that provide housing, mental health, employment support and opportunities, and other crucial services to this population. The program is targeted for up to ten youth, ages fifteen to twenty four, who will participate in the program for six months. Throughout the duration of the program, the youth will be housed within the organization. After graduating and completing the program, up to five of the youth will be hired as mentors for the new incoming cohort of participants. All graduates of the program will receive assistance with securing future housing and employment.

This program is innovative and challenging. The youth will be trained in acting, set-building, costume care and design, box office duties, and leadership activities such as facilitating warm-ups and supervising each of the previously mentioned activities. Throughout the six month program, the team will collaborate to write, rehearse, and produce a theatrical production. The production will highlight the some of the stories of the youth and the challenges they face within the community. This production will be an open performance for community members and family members of the youth to attend. Community stakeholders and political advocates will be

invited to attend and participate in talk-back sessions after each performance. Upon completion of the program, the youth will have various skills including but not limited to: public leadership, communication, collaboration, money handling, wood-working, costume and clothing design, marketing and promotion. The youth will be selected and hired to partake in this six-month program based on willingness and readiness. Depending upon available funds, the youth will be provided a bi-weekly or monthly stipend, which they will be encouraged to save towards a housing deposit. They will work as full time employees, approximately forty hours a week. Upon hiring, the youth will be assigned a mentor and mental health specialist who will meet with the youth weekly to assess needs and advocate for the well-being of all participants.

This project will require the employment of skilled theatre artists as well as mental health professionals. A small team of theatre artists will work closely with the youth to guide them through all of the steps contributing to the final production. This project can utilize community members from local theatres and arts organizations to bring in volunteer guest artists and assistants. They will work closely with the youth from the beginning to establish trust and belonging through theatre games and improvisation. As the relationships are built they will move into the planning and mastery phase. During this phase, the youth will begin to learn how to run the theatre. When they demonstrate competency of the skills they have learned, they will begin to lead the group and periodically supervise activities. They will be in charge of running warm-ups and monitoring each other. As the plot of the performance takes shape, they will begin to build the set and costumes, and work on marketing and publicity. Throughout this process, they will attend weekly meetings with mentors and mental health professionals to monitor any triggers or issues that might arise. Finally, the youth will be in charge of running the box office and selling tickets in advance for the event. Ultimately all ten youth will participate in the

performance, unless they strongly desire to be a stage or box office manager. The group will lead and facilitate the talk back session after each show to share their story with the community.

Mentors will act as job and social advisors to the youth throughout the program. The youth will begin by meeting the mentors as a group and they will eventually select the person they would like to meet with weekly. This mentor will assist with job readiness and general social and emotional support. These mentors will have experience working with vulnerable youth populations. Upon graduation, up to five participants will be selected to become peer mentors for the next cohort. This is an opportunity for them to give back to their program and practice generosity while also supporting their peers and gaining valuable leadership experience.

### **Theory of change**

This project is created within the model of The Circle of Courage (see Appendix 1), which is a core component of the theory of Positive Youth Development (PYD), written about in the book “Reclaiming Youth at Risk,” by Brendtro and Brokenleg (2001). One of the core ideas of Positive Youth Development is that positive self-esteem is crucial to the well-being and development of young people. In the book “Approaches to Positive Youth Development,” the authors posit that PYD is a strengths-based theory, “Replacing the deficit view of adolescence, the PYD perspective sees all adolescents as having strengths (by virtue at least of their potential for change). The perspective suggests that increases in well-being and thriving are possible for all youth through aligning the strengths of young people with the developmental assets present in their social and physical ecology” (Silbereisen & Lerner, 2007). PYD promotes positive relationships that are mutually beneficial between youth and their relationships with others and systems they interact with.



The Circle of Courage acts as model within PYD to help youth establish positive self-esteem and worth (Brendtro et. al., 2001). The Circle of Courage proposes four central values that help empower youth to reclaim and identify their self-worth. The four central values are: belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity (Brendtro et. al., 2001). These values are crucial to youth as they reclaim their identities as members of a community that appreciates and sees their inherent value. This theatrical intervention follows The Circle of Courage in a linear fashion. Belonging is established through community building activities and improve games. The youth will have established housing for the six month duration of the program; a physical place of belonging. They will develop a sense of community with the artists and mentors they work with, not to mention the other youth within the cohort. Second, the youth will establish mastery over the skills they learn through the creation of their show. As the youth begin to establish mastery and confidence in the skills they learn, they will all be given opportunities to exhibit independence and complete tasks with little supervision. They will be asked to share their story with the community and begin to prepare for life outside the program. Finally, the youth will practice generosity by giving back to the community through the gift of their performance. Some of the youth will also be able to practice generosity by becoming mentors for the incoming cohort.

This program also includes aspects of a Social Enterprise Intervention. Social Enterprise Intervention (SEI) aims to “strengthen youths’ internal assets to enhance positive outcomes and protect them against high risk behavior” (Ferguson, 2011, p. 496). In Fergusons’ study, youth in Los Angeles participated in a graphic design employment program, while having weekly meetings with mentors and mental health professionals. The support of mentors and mental health professionals contributed to the 69% completion rate within this intervention. The theatre

practitioners employed for this intervention will have cultural competence and reflective listening training, but mental health professionals will be necessary for the balanced wellness of all participants.

The theatrical aspect of this intervention is derived from theories of Applied Theatre. Participation in theatre promotes innumerable benefits. In particular, adolescents who have experienced serious trauma and other vulnerable or “at-risk” youth can benefit from Applied Theatre. Applied Theatre can be thought of as an umbrella term for any type of theatre which targets social change and is committed to making a difference in populations throughout the lifespan (Prendergast&Saxton, 2009). Applied Theatre acts as a platform for education and prevention, intervention and therapy, and as a tool for recovery and skills building in vulnerable youth populations.

One of the methods or styles of applied theatre that can be utilized for performance is Theatre of the Oppressed. More specifically, Forum Theatre is derived from Theatre of the Oppressed, founded by Augusto Boal, a radical theatre director and politician. A study by Wrentschur and Moser (2014) explains Forum Theatre “as an interactive form of theatrical performances in which the public is invited to take part in what happens on stage, to try out ideas for solutions or changes in a social or political conflict or a problem shown on stage” (p. 401). Forum Theatre is a popular style of Applied Theatre that can be utilized with many populations in which the audience becomes involved in the struggles portrayed by the actors and is encouraged to get up on stage themselves and try out new solutions. If trained theatre artists were to utilize these kinds of theatrical styles, it would engage community audience members within the performance. This kind of practice encourages audiences to think of themselves as active participants within their communities, who have the capability to create substantial change. This

style of theatre, may not be initially comfortable for the youth, but may be better received after the program is already established.

### **Goals of project**

The goal of this project is to empower youth struggling with housing instability and homelessness by increasing job readiness skills, resilience and emotional well-being (see Appendix 3). This is achieved through theatrical job-training, mental health care, and mentoring. The youth will be empowered as they work through The Circle of Courage model in writing and participating in a theatrical production. They will be well supported by their mentors and mental health professionals to address any issues that arise. Upon completion of this project, the youth will have a healthier self-esteem and pride over a job well done. This will increase their resilience and positive coping skills, which are so crucial for this population, and can be applied to other parts of their lives (e.g., relationships; obtaining housing and employment).

### **Resources/Inputs needed**

This proposal requires well-trained individuals to commit to working on the project for six months. The consistency of staff and support is crucial to the success of this intervention because many of these youth come from trauma backgrounds where consistency of care was missing. The intervention can initially start with ten interested youth who are experiencing homeless and housing instability with an interest or willingness to work in the arts. This intervention does require an existing facility that can house the youth for the duration of the six-month project. The project will require a physical space to perform the show that the youth will write and perform in. This does not have to be a traditional theatre, but can be a transformed community room or similar space. If a local theatre space can be donated, that would be ideal. It

also will require the expertise of trained theatre artists and practitioners to guide the youth through the show creation process. These tasks will be communicated through verbal direction, but a manual will also be created for youth and staff reference. These shows will initially have minimal sets and costumes, but productions may become more extravagant as time and support increases. These items would be procured from local lumber yards and donations. Some funding may be necessary for the actual materials. Funding can be sourced from in-kind donations, grants, and potential community sponsors.

During the first year of the program, community members and employees of the existing organization may act as mentors and supervisors to the youth as they work through the six-month project. These mentors will eventually be youth who have completed the program and are able to give back to the new cohorts. These mentors will be trained in trauma-informed care and PYD. In order to be successful, the participants will need access to mental health care. This would ideally be provided by Licensed Clinical Social Workers who would already be employed by the organization. Social workers have training in trauma-informed care, systems theory, strengths-based perspective, and other essential theories that make them the ideal mental health professionals for empowering this particular population. Finally, the support of community and political stake holders is crucial to the success of this project, not only for financial reasons, but because they will be provided with crucial insight into the lives of these youth by witnessing their performances at the end of the six months.

## **Activities**

During this program, the youth will participate in weekly check-ins with their individual social workers as well as their mentors. The mentors will provide a positive social and confidential outlet and will conduct mock interviews and assist with resume preparation, while the social worker will provide necessary access to mental health evaluations. Additionally, the youth will be participating in the process of creating a full-scale theatrical production, complete with costumes, and set. The script will be written by the cast and theatre artists. The scripts will be about struggles the youth have faced, varying from discrimination to violence on the streets. Each cohort of students will produce very different work. It is possible that one of the performances would be factual stories about the history of the youth, while another show might be about a topic like the barriers this population faces to finding housing. It is crucial for the youth to have a say in how the story is told. The theatre facilitators will be encouraged to guide the youth to work together to make these decisions. The stories of the youth should be respected and held with care. One of the reasons this proposal has the possibility to make such a difference is because it gives a voice to the stories of the youth. Vulnerability and Shame-Resilience expert Brene Brown often repeats this quote about storytelling, “When we find the courage to share our experiences and the compassion to hear others tell their stories, we force shame out of hiding, and end the silence” (Brown, 2008) These productions will reduce stigma and empower the youth to share their stories and build invaluable resilience within themselves and their communities. Once a cohort has graduated from the program, approximately half of the youth will be asked to act as peer mentors to the incoming cohort of youth. This gives the youth an incredible opportunity for leadership and further connectedness within the program.

**Outputs**

Upon completion of the program, all youth will have polished resumes and have participated in three mock interviews. They will have obtained job interview skills and assistance finding employment within the community. They will have spent approximately twenty five hours with their mentor to build their resume, interview skills, and secure housing. With their social worker they will process through any issues that may arise and receive mental health counseling. The program will admit ten participants every six months until/if the program expands. All of the youth will have participated in all of the areas of theatrical production (ie, costume design, set-building, box office, etc.). And finally, the youth will all have performed and contributed to the production that will be presented to the community.

**Short-term Outcomes**

The goals for this project are lofty because it has such incredible potential for its participants. There is a small margin of youth who may not find the program to be a good fit, but most of the youth who participate will flourish in this supportive and well-balanced environment. Short-term outcomes are listed within the Logic Model for this proposal (see Appendix 3). It is estimated that 75% of participants will complete the program during the first year of two cohorts. Every person who completes the program will find secure housing, employment, and demonstrate mental wellness and stability within six months of graduation. 50% of the graduates from each cohort will be selected to become mentors for the next cohort of participants.

**Long-term Outcomes**

The long-term outcomes for the project are listed in the Logic Model (See Appendix 3). Overall the program aims to have at least 75% of participants ultimately continue to give back to

their community through volunteering for the program within five years of finishing the program. 90% of the participants who complete the program are projected to maintain stable housing and employment long term (ten years after graduation). These goals will be achieved through the relationships and stability provided through the program and the hope that those support systems will continue to provide belonging in the future.

### **Plan for Evaluation**

Upon the hiring process, all participants will agree to participate in longitudinal evaluations of their emotional wellness and employment and housing status. Data will be collected upon graduation and for the six months following graduation to determine employment and housing situations for the short-term outcome goals. Employees of the organization will reach out to participants through a bi-yearly phone or email survey to update the program on their housing and employment status for ten years following the program. This data will be tracked and recorded through a database system like Excel. This will allow them to stay connected with the program in case of further need for assistance. These employees will be trained to work with this population ethically and provide support and resources over the phone, as necessary. This would be a great position for Bachelor's of Social Work students.

Mental wellness and stability will be measured by the WEMWBS (The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale, 2006) (see Appendix 2). This scale was selected because of its accessible language and ease of use. It is a fourteen question scale with a scoring system with five response categories (none of the time to all of the time). It is a positively positioned scale to measure mental wellness and functional wellness. This scale will regularly be used throughout the six months within the program as well, so that participants can track their own progress.

### **Anticipated Challenges**

This is a challenging proposal because it is so multi-faceted. In an ideal setting, this intervention would be best for youth who are in stable housing for the duration of the program. This kind of long-term housing is expensive and may not be easy to come by. The intervention could be adapted for other housing alternatives, but this is not ideal. Research indicates the effectiveness of interventions where the basic needs of youth are met first. Establishing housing and mental health care are not cheap endeavors. However, the pay-off will be exponential.

The other challenge would be finding youth who would be able and willing to commit to a six month long project such as this. Many youth from this population may find a program like this to be too restrictive. It can be difficult for them to abide by rules and integrate back into a system. It would be crucial for this program to be adaptive and flexible to the youth's feedback and needs. It would be ideal for each youth to be sponsored by donors or community members to complete this program. If each youth knew where their paycheck was coming from, it might establish a sense of community responsibility and belonging.

It might be a challenge to find theatre artists who are trained in working with vulnerable youth populations. It will be crucial for these leaders to have strong skills in reflective listening and understanding the influence of trauma. Bachelor's and Master's of Social Work students who have training or experience working with vulnerable youth populations would be an invaluable resource to utilize. Leaders of this program would benefit from training in Applied Theatre techniques as well. These positions should be well-compensated for their time whether by credits for school or monetary compensation. The funding for this kind of program may be from grants, donations, and generous community sponsors and donations. It may be difficult to



initially garnish community support, but after a year or two of successful cohorts, this model has the potential to be very respected by community members.

### **Conclusion**

The vision of this three-pronged project proposal is lofty. The most effective interventions with youth experiencing homelessness highlighted in the literature review were creative and innovative. Social workers must think outside the box with this hard-to-reach population. Positive Youth Development and The Circle of Courage are inspired theories for all organizations to utilize in their programming with youth populations. While this proposed intervention is not without flaws, it has the potential to transform individuals and communities. When political stakeholders and community members hear and understand the plight of the most vulnerable youth in our country, change begins. When youth begin to feel empowered and equipped with new skills, they will go out into the world and become leaders in their communities. It is time we stop ignoring youth experiencing homelessness and we begin addressing their needs in creative and thoughtful ways through which they can thrive and contribute abundantly within their communities.

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